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# Straight: A Life Laid Bare

By Ruth Dean
Washington Star Staff Writer

"It's a terrible story. We're all victims of history," said Michael Straight, his usually buoyant voice a little weary around the edges after a traumatic week in which he's had to lay his whole life bare.

Straight, a former editor of the New Republic and a former deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, was identified in news stories this week as the man who unmasked former royal art archivist Anthony Blunt as a Soviet spy.

It all happened back in 1963, when President Kennedy was thinking of naming Straight to head a national council for the arts. Straight, now 64, felt obliged to reveal his early ties with student communists at Cambridge University and revealed Blunt's attempt to recruit him in 1937 as a Soviet spy. Straight had turned him down and returned to the United States.

When this was revealed to the FBI in 1963, they passed it on to the British Secret Service, not knowing that the British and the CIA were already investigating Blunt but had no proof linking him to the Soviets. Blunt denied it, so Straight offered to go to England and confront him personally and, if need be, take him to court. In return for immunity, Blunt confessed, but the matter was kept confidential, Straight explained in an interview yesterday, "because of the names of others" in the spy network.

Blunt was a don at Cambridge during Straight's undergraduate days at the English university in the 1930s, and Straight recalls him as "totally different from Burgess, a decent sort of chap."

It all came out this week, when the London Daily Mail began serializing a forthcoming book by its defense specialist, Chapman Pincher, implicating leading British intelligence figures of the World War II and "cold war" eras, among them the homosexuals Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean (who defected to Moscow in 1951), Blunt, and the previously unpublished names of Charles Ellis, Britain's third-ranked spy at the end of World War II, and the late Sir Roger Hollis, former head of British counterintelligence.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher publicly stated on Thursday, however, that there was "no evidence" to support the allegations about Hollis, whom Pincher linked to Blunt, and the "middle-aged American" later identified as Straight. "I never heard of him," Straight said of Hollis.

For Straight, the week's nightmare began "when two strangers – a reporter and photographer from the Daily Mail – arrived at my home (in Bethesda) and said they wanted to talk to me. They were quite embarrassed. And the phone hasn't stopped since. It begins ringing at 6 a.m. and doesn't stop until midnight."

Burgess was at Cambridge the same time as Straight. But Straight recalls not knowing Burgess well. "He was known as a Marxist. He appeared to be dissolute, a drunk, a layabout, and a repulsive man." But Burgess was part of the student scene in which Straight was a participant, a group of brilliant young intellectuals caught up in the dialogue of their times – which pitted Marxism against Fascism in a mad swirl of events including the Spanish civil war.

Actually, what put Straight through the wringer this week were the personal memories of a close dead friend that were reawakened with revelation of the story about Blunt's attempt to recruit him.

Actually, Blunt's attempt to recruit Straight represented the last straw in what can only be described as pretty desperate tactics by the Soviets to recruit student agents. For it came less than two weeks after Straight's best friend, John Cornford, was killed in the Spanish civil war. Because Cornford had been a dedicated Marxist, Blunt told Straight he "owed it to his dead friend's memory to carry on his work." Blunt wanted him to go back to the United States and work for the J.P. Morgan Co. (Straight's father was a partner of Morgan) and thus "infiltrate" Wall Street.

Straight was "horrified" and says he "turned him down flat." In his zeal for a cause, Blunt hadn't measured what a personal blow Cornford's death was to Straight. Though he was a student "fellow traveler," Straight said he didn't carry his convictions beyond the campus as his friend did, although apparently their divergence in views interfered not one whit with their mutual regard for each other.

"He was just a very close, personal friend of mine," Straight said, recalling some memories. Straight was the "leader of the left" in the Cambridge Union, a student debating society. Had it not been for the death of King George V, which cancelled all scheduled events, Straight said he was slated to debate Sir Oswald Mosely. "I was only 19, and Mosely was an eminent debater. It just shows you how much we were out of our depth. We were in very, very turbulent waters."

Explaining the climate of the times, Straight said, "It's hard today to understand that in 1937 the Russians were spokesmen for a cross-faction which was right. But if you believed in stopping Hitler, if you believed in collective security, just by the nature of the vacuum you were sucked over to the extreme left. There was no leadership. You had the appeasers on the conservative right, and the labor party was split apart.

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